Harris blasts, and takes money from, Epstein's law firm

By BRIAN SLODYSKO

WASHINGTON (AP) — Kamala Harris bemoaned the influence of the powerful and connected elite last Tuesday when she called on top Justice Department officials to recuse themselves from any matter related to Jeffrey Epstein. She said their former law firm's work on behalf of the financier accused of sexual abuse "calls into question the integrity of our legal system."

Yet the same day, Harris' husband headlined a Chicago fundraiser for her presidential campaign that was hosted by six partners of that firm — Kirkland and Ellis, according to an invitation obtained by The Associated Press.

Harris, a California senator and Democratic presidential candidate, was one of several White House hopefuls to blast the handling of Epstein's case in Florida a decade ago, when his lawyers negotiated a deal with federal prosecutors that allowed him to avoid the possibility of years in prison. But her decision to move ahead with the fundraiser hosted by Kirkland and Ellis partners while criticizing the firm underscores the tension that can arise when a politician's rhetoric collides with his or her need to raise money to sustain a presidential campaign.

"If any connection with Kirkland and Ellis is a stain on (senior Justice Department officials), why isn't a connection with the law firm for the receipt of campaign contributions a stain on her own campaign?" said Paul S. Ryan, an attorney for the good-government group Common Cause.

Ian Sams, a Harris spokesman, said there wasn't a problem with accepting the campaign contributions because the firm is big and the partners who hosted the fundraiser didn't work on Epstein's plea agreement.

"The people involved in that case have not supported her campaign, and she wouldn't want that support anyway," Sams said.

The firm and the six partners named on the event invitation did not respond to requests for comment.

The Epstein case has roiled Washington this month after federal prosecutors announced fresh charges against the financier, who is accused of paying underage girls for massages and then molesting them at his homes in Palm Beach, Florida, and New York during the 2000s. President Donald Trump's labor secretary, Alex Acosta, resigned on Friday over his handling of the case. As a U.S. attorney in Miami, Acosta met with Kirkland and Ellis lawyers and agreed to a deal that allowed Epstein to avoid

federal trial by pleading guilty to state charges and serving 13 months in jail.

The new attention being paid to the case has also drawn scrutiny on Attorney General William Barr and Deputy Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen, who both worked for Kirkland and Ellis. Harris, who is a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said it's necessary that they recuse themselves from involvement in the matter to avoid even the "appearance of impropriety."

"In our democracy, no one — no matter how powerful or well-connected — is above the law. Yet Epstein's deal, secured by his lawyers at Kirkland and Ellis, calls into question the integrity of our legal system and undermines the public's confidence that justice will be served," Harris said in a statement released hours after the Chicago fundraiser.

Barr is recused from any review of a 2008 plea deal, but has said that he doesn't need to do so with the current case.

Before her election to the Senate, Harris was the attorney general of California and was elected to two terms as San Francisco's district attorney. Her husband, Doug Emhoff, is also a high powered attorney who works in corporate law. So it is perhaps little surprise that law firms have been one of the top industries that have donated to her presidential bid, with Kirkland and Ellis being no exception.

Her campaign declined to say how much was raised at last week's event, and the sum won't have to be reported to the Federal Election Commission until October. Records show that a handful of employees and partners of the firm donated about $6,000 to Harris during the first quarter of the year — a drop when compared to the $12 million she raised during that time.

"It's an international law firm with thousands of employees, many of whom probably support Kamala Harris because she's a tough prosecutor who actually knows how to put away predators, unlike the Trump lackeys who protect them," Sams said.

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